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Constructing alignment for sustainable careers:
Insights from the career narratives of management consultants

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Abstract

While prior literature identifies a person's alignment of their career with the interests of their employing organization as a source of career sustainability, we still know little about how individuals construe such alignment. Our study contributes to understanding of the sustainable career framework by conceptualizing individual career alignment as a narrative accomplishment. Building on an interview study of 34 consultants from a large management consulting firm, we identify four narrative approaches for construing alignment within this challenging organizational context: overidentifying, conforming, creating symbiosis, and moving on. Our findings elaborate the sustainable career framework by suggesting alignment narratives as a contextually situated expression of agency in people's striving for sustainable careers. We discuss implications for theory and practice.

Keywords:

Sustainable career; Alignment; Construing career; Narrative; Tension; Management consultant.

Introduction

The sustainable career perspective highlights the interdependence of individuals' career-making and organizations' enabling of career opportunities and career development (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015, p. 9). While it acknowledges that both individuals and employers need to align their respective interests (De Vos, Dujardin, Gielens, & Meyers, 2016; Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015; Veld, Semeijn, & Van Vuuren, 2015), it emphasizes *individuals'* alignment of career interests to organizational interests (Kossek, Valcour, & Lirio, 2012; Valcour, 2015). Prior literature suggests that individuals' alignment of career interests with those of their organizations produces positive individual outcomes, such as career success (Hall, Lee, Kossek, & Heras, 2012), job satisfaction, and well-being (e.g., Tolentino et al., 2014; Zacher, 2014). It also yields positive organizational outcomes, such as organizational commitment and improved job performance (Valcour, 2015).

Despite these important contributions, we still know little about *how* individuals construe the alignment of their career with organizational interests. Addressing this question is important because aligning personal interests with those of the organization presents several challenges. First, individual and organizational interests may diverge. Inkson and King (2011) suggest that careers are a "contested terrain in which organizations pursue strategic advantages and individuals personal advantages" (p. 37). Hence, when individuals' personal agendas contradict organizational ones, individuals may struggle to construe the alignment required for a sustainable career within the organization (Cappelli, 1998; Ferris & Judge, 1991; Savickas, 2005). Second, individuals interpret their organizational context in different ways. Prior sustainable careers literature seeks to overcome overly individualistic conceptions of careers by emphasizing the importance of individuals' alignment with employment settings. Yet, we lack an understanding of how individuals' construal of their employment setting influences the alignment of their career in such a context (Cohen & Duberley, 2015; Johns, 2006; Mayrhofer,

Meyer, & Steyrer, 2007; McLaren & Durepos, 2019). Consequently, studying how people construe their alignment in specific organizational contexts, particularly those that present complexities, tensions, and ambiguities about career sustainability extends existing knowledge.

To address this question, we use an interview study of 34 management consultants in a firm operating internationally. Management consulting provides a relevant setting for the study of sustainable careers. Many management consulting firms follow an ‘up-or-out’ career logic, which constrains the possibility of sustainable careers for many employees (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Costas & Grey, 2014; Noury, Gand, & Sardas, 2017). The high performance pressures and socio-ideological forms of control that characterize consulting firms (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004) make the need to align with the organization particularly salient for individuals therein. We adopt a narrative approach to investigate the ways by which consultants construe alignment of their career with organizational interests and expectations. There are two reasons for this methodological choice. First, a narrative approach attends to individuals’ purposeful efforts toward career-related meaning-making (Bujold, 2004; Christensen & Johnston, 2003; Cochran, 1990; Cohen & Mallon, 2001) and the ways by which they construe themselves and their actions in relation to the various contexts in which they are embedded (Bujold, 2004). Second, a narrative approach informs understanding of how people construe and integrate the obstacles, circumstances, and tensions in pursuing careers over time (Winslade, 2007).

Our study makes the following theoretical contributions. First, it elaborates our understanding of sustainable careers by conceptualizing individual alignment as a narrative accomplishment that is embedded in people’s subjective experiences and meaning-making. Second, our study strengthens a situated understanding of the sustainable career framework. In addition, we contribute to our empirical understanding of the ways by which people strive for

sustainable careers in a particularly challenging organizational context, such as management consulting.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we review the literature on sustainable careers and alignment. Second, we introduce our narrative approach to career alignment. Third, we present an overview of the context of management consulting. We then describe our methodology and findings. We close by discussing our study's theoretical and empirical contributions to sustainable career literature and their implications.

Sustainable careers and alignment

Sustainable careers have been defined as “the sequence of an individual’s different career experiences, reflected through a variety of patterns of continuity over time, crossing several social spaces, and characterized by individual agency, herewith providing meaning to the individual” (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015, p. 7). Contained within this definition are four dimensions of sustainable careers: time, social space, agency, and meaning (De Vos et al., 2016). Time refers to the temporal quality of careers, spanning career experiences and events in the past, present, and future. Time is central to the aspiration of career sustainability in addressing current career demands without compromising future needs (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015). Social space comprises the range of contexts across which careers unfold, including employment arrangements, such as full-time, part-time, or self-employed working (Clarke, 2013), and non-work environments, such as home, friends, and leisure (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014; Lee, Kossek, Hall, & Litrico, 2011). These social spaces are implicated in sustainable careers through their influence on how individuals view their career interests and alignment with their employment setting. Agency refers to an individual’s role in navigating their career by taking ownership of it and making deliberate career choices (Valcour, 2015). From a sustainable career perspective, a person’s agency is situated in relation to their

employment setting. Thus, career sustainability requires the formation of an understanding of how time and social space influence careers. Meaning acknowledges that career sustainability is not only directed toward skills development but also toward deriving meaning from career activities and events (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015).

A sustainable career perspective attends to the interaction between people's career-making and organizations. Thereby, it seeks to address the overly voluntaristic and transient assumptions of boundaryless and protean career perspectives and, in particular, the associated assumption that individuals make careers irrespective of employers' expectations (e.g., Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Briscoe & Hall, 2006; Briscoe, Henagan, Burton, & Murphy, 2012). By conceptualizing career sustainability as a matter of matching individual needs, values, and expectations with organizational interests over the long term (De Vos et al., 2016), sustainable career literature emphasizes individuals' ability to *align* their career with organizational settings (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015). For example, De Vos and colleagues (2016) identify a range of activities through which individuals can foster a sustainable career, such as developing professional networks, investing in employability, and reflecting on the personal meaning of career success.

Despite these valuable insights, several issues remain unaddressed. For example, we still lack an empirically grounded understanding of *the ways by which individuals align their careers with their given organizational settings* (i.e., *how* people align their careers). The four dimensions of the sustainable career framework – time, social space, agency, and meaning – suggest that people's ways of aligning with organizational settings can vary. Individuals' situated construal of organizational demands for alignment of their career are influenced by their own particular construal of time, social space, agency, and meaning. Furthermore, a person's alignment of their career with organizational demands is not always straightforward

and unambiguous. Balancing individual and organizational interests is difficult when the interests and political agendas of the parties clash with one another (Cappelli, 1998; Ferris & Judge, 1991; Inkson & King, 2011). For example, Inkson and King (2011) suggest that individuals' striving for personal advantage, increased earnings, and personal career development goals often conflict with organizations' interests in ensuring successful performance and capital growth. Hence, the construction of a meaningful career involves tensions, conflicts, and ambiguities for the individual (Baruch & Vardi, 2016; Hoyer & Steyaert, 2015). In light of these observations, a sustainable career perspective requires a more nuanced understanding of the ways by which people deal with these tensions, conflicts, and ambiguities as they construe alignment between their career and organizational demands.

A narrative perspective to studying alignment

We draw on a narrative approach to investigate the ways by which individuals construe alignment between their careers and various organizational demands. This approach is particularly suitable as it addresses the four dimensions of the sustainable career framework described above (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015). First, a narrative approach is central to studying individuals' *meaning*-making. For example, narrative approaches have been adopted in careers literature to examine how individuals make sense of career-related events and experiences (Bujold, 2004; Cochran, 1990; Cohen & Mallon, 2001). Thereby, narratives have a dual purpose: individuals make meaning through narration (i.e., through the telling of stories) and, in addition, narratives are the outcome of this *meaning*-making process. Second, *time* is a defining characteristic of narratives. The temporality of stories connects past, present, and future events in order to create coherence over time (Collin, 1998; Ricoeur, 1984; Polkinghorne, 1988). Third, narratives provide individuals with opportunities for construing *agency*. Individuals' narratives construe intentionality and purposeful efforts in relation to

events (Bruner, 1986, 1991; McAdams, 2008). This opportunity for narrative agency is also available when the organizational setting appears to offer limited scope for self-determined actions. Finally, narratives are always embedded in *social space*. People's narratives situate events, strategies and actions in their relational and institutional contexts. For example, career sustainability becomes evident through the ways by which narratives interweave work and non-work spaces, in particular in relation to superiors, colleagues, family, and friends. From a narrative perspective, people's stories about their relational context are not simply data about the aspects of an external context, with its constraints and opportunities. Rather, they offer insights into the ways by which the narrator maintains agency in relation to his or her construal of social space (e.g., Bosley, Arnold, & Cohen, 2009).

In career studies, narrative approaches have been used to investigate career counseling (e.g., Cochran, 1997; Savickas et al., 2009; Taylor & Savickas, 2016), the construction of career identities (e.g., Duberley & Carrigan, 2013; LaPointe, 2010), career development (e.g., Bujold, 2004; Severy, 2008), and career change (e.g., Cohen & Mallon, 2001; Hoyer & Steyaert, 2015). Cohen and Mallon (2001) use a narrative approach to investigate career transitions. They argue that individuals' narratives reveal "rich ambiguities" and, thus, "can yield a multifaceted and integrated view of career" (p. 65). More recently, Wolf (2019) adopts a narrative lens to examine managers' construction of protean career identities. Through telling stories, managers integrated contradictions between their own values and beliefs and organizational demands. Building on these studies, we propose that a narrative approach is particularly suitable to studying people's purposeful efforts toward career sustainability. As we have shown, a narrative approach attends to the ways by which people invoke the core aspects of the sustainable career framework – meaning-making, time, social space, and agency – when construing the alignment between their career and their organizational context.

Conceptualizing people's ways of construing career alignment as a narrative

accomplishment extends related career concepts, such as career correspondence (Lofquist & Dawis, 1969) and career adjustment (Crites, 1969). Whereas the focus of a narrative approach is on different ways of aligning, these latter two concepts focus on alignment as an entity, including the conditions and outcomes of alignment. For example, career correspondence refers to the ‘congruence’ or ‘fit’ between employees’ abilities and the requirements of the work environment (Lofquist & Dawis, 1969). Thus, career correspondence theory assesses people’s traits, skills, and competences. In contrast, a narrative approach examines how people draw on their various experiences over time to construe the alignment between their career and the organizational context. Crites’ (1969) model of vocational adjustment examines the work-adjustment mechanisms by which individuals respond to work-related challenges. Although valuable, work-adjustment mechanisms do not provide much detail on associated behaviors and how they are embedded in context. A narrative approach extends these concepts by attending more explicitly to the role of people’s construal of time, social space, agency, and meaning in accomplishing alignment, and thereby career sustainability.

Management consulting: A challenging context for sustainable careers

Management consulting firms present an interesting context for studying career sustainability and the ways by which individuals construe alignment between their career and organizational expectations. While management consulting can be an attractive career choice, prior research suggests that making a career within this context can be challenging (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Noury et al., 2017; Adams & Zanzi, 2004). Like other professional organizations, many management consulting firms follow an ‘up-or-out’ career logic, according to which individuals need to be promoted within a particular time frame to remain in the organization, even though these firms provide only limited promotion opportunities (Alvesson, 2012; Costas & Grey, 2014). This career logic constrains individuals’ ability to create long-term career

sustainability within the organization (Gunz, 1988). As an alternative, individuals need to leave the organization when the prospect of promotion diminishes. This career challenge is accentuated by the project-based nature of consulting work, which is associated with temporary assignments and fragmented work experiences and relationships (Alvesson, 2004). Hence, how consultants seek to create continuity in their career is an important issue, worthy of further investigation.

In addition, the careers of management consultants, like many other professionals, present a tension between high levels of work-related autonomy and the internalization of socio-normative forms of control (Alvesson, 2004; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004). On the one hand, Alvesson and Kärreman (2007) suggest that human resource management (HRM) systems in management consulting firms exercise control by “tying the self with a particular career idea and prospect, linked to a prescribed identity project” (p. 720). In this context, consultants are usually required to comply with organizational norms and rules to accomplish a successful career and, from this perspective, achieving career sustainability in consulting does not seem to offer much space for agency (Bergström & Knights, 2006). On the other hand, studies have also shown how consultants may seek to construct careers in line with personal priorities. One such approach involves resisting organizational norms (Costas & Grey, 2014; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009). In addition, Noury and colleagues (2017) argue that management consultants can achieve work–life balance by taking ownership of their situation, voicing their concerns, and negotiating informal arrangements, outside of formal structures. However, we still lack a more nuanced understanding of the wider range of strategies by which consultants construe agency in spite of the many challenges of their organizational setting.

In sum, our study is concerned with the following research question: *How do management consultants’ narratives construe organizational alignment to accomplish career sustainability?*

Methods

To investigate this question, we conducted an inductive study in Consult-King¹, a large management consulting firm that operates internationally. Consult-King employs over 400,000 people and has offices worldwide, throughout Europe, the US, Asia, Africa, and Australia. Across these different locations, it adopts a standardized, hierarchical career structure common to management consulting firms. It also promises individual consultants an opportunity to nurture their talents and work on innovative and impactful projects.

Data collection

The three members of the research team interviewed a total of 34 management consultants from the organization's Austria/Germany and UK regions. As indicated in Table 1, the sample involves different career levels, countries of employment, and organizational tenure. About 40 percent of interviewees were female. To generate an understanding of individuals' personal perspectives, we approached research participants through informal channels, such as our existing networks, the University's alumni network, and personal recommendations. As a bilingual research team, we interviewed consultants from the Austrian/German office in German, and those from the UK office in English. The interviews lasted between 50 and 110 minutes and were audio-recorded, fully transcribed, and anonymized. To build a trusting and open setting, we conducted most of the interviews outside the workplace, such as in nearby cafes. Because of consultants' travel, five interviews were conducted by phone or Skype. At the beginning of each interview, we asked interviewees to sketch their career path and important career events. This visual representation of their career trajectory provided multiple concrete reference points from which we could inquire into their career experiences. Consistent with a narrative approach, we asked open-ended questions that allowed our interviewees to reflect on their career experiences within the organization, the meaning of important career

events, and their different career activities over time.

Insert Table 1 about here

Data analysis

Following Cochran (1990), we examined consultants' telling of stories about their careers in terms of their efforts toward making meaning of their careers. Given our specific interest in the ways by which consultants' narratives construct alignment with their organizations, our analytical strategy followed Riessman (2001) in that we focused on "topically specific stories organized around characters, setting and plot" that "recapitulate specific events the narrator witnessed or experienced" (p. 5). Thereby, we adopted elements of thematic analysis to identify patterns that were repeated among respondents (Riessman, 1987).

Our analysis included four stages. First, each member of the research team read the interview transcripts in detail. Consistent with a narrative approach, we treated each interview as a separate case and analytical unit (Elliott, 2005). A consultant's alignment with their organization emerged as an important aspect of their career narrative, although the meanings and actions associated with achieving alignment differed between consultants. To investigate these initial findings, we focused our coding on specific text passages. Through discussion of these passages and our initial coding, it emerged that alignment was associated with important career events that involved tensions and contradictions. These events were turning points, which required interviewees to make meaning of their personal career priorities in relation to the interests of the organization. Furthermore, interviewees described actions that they had taken to overcome these tensions and contradictions. The research team clarified interpretations collectively to ensure a consistent approach in members' subsequent analyses.

In our second analysis stage, we identified recurrent patterns across consultants' career narratives. Similarly to other qualitative career studies (e.g., Duberley, Cohen, & Mallon, 2006), our narrative analysis drew on existing literature – in this case, the four dimensions of the sustainable career model (time, social space, agency, and meaning) (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015) – as sensitizing devices. While these dimensions were evident in each transcript, interviewees' narratives construed them in different ways. For example, we identified distinct approaches by which consultants' narratives construed the social aspects of career sustainability. Thus, while some talked about their relationships at work in political and instrumental ways, for example, how they had persuaded powerful sponsors to advance their personal career interests, others emphasized personal identification with the community and spoke about their contribution to Consult-King as a whole.

The third stage clarified the boundaries between narrative themes by iterating between theory and data (Riessman, 2001). Through extensive conversations in the research team about the meaning of narrative themes, where these were evident, and specific cases, we developed descriptions for each narrative theme. We also revisited the literature to define the boundaries between each theme and adjust their labeling. For example, the narrative 'alignment as being the organization' did not seem to accurately represent consultants' strong identification with organizational interests in order to achieve alignment. Hence, this narrative theme instead became 'overidentification'. In our final stage, two researchers examined these themes across all narratives to substantiate and enrich the findings.

Findings

Our analysis identifies four distinct narrative themes in consultants' construal of alignment between their career and their organizations' interests: overidentifying, conforming, creating symbiosis, and moving on. In this section we define these themes, drawing on illustrative cases.

In addition, we summarize the four narratives and their key characteristics in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

Overidentifying

The first group of narratives construed alignment by strongly identifying themselves with the organization and its career practices. These narratives showed temporal continuity – the narrator’s past, present, and future career experiences in the organization were integrated in a temporal flow. For example, Joshua had steadily advanced his career through the organization, which he described as “a good, very strong progression.” He was actively considering the next step of managing director, because it symbolized accountability and responsibility:

In relation to promotion to managing director, it’s a highly regarded thing in the industry. It’s a job where you have a lot of people and you’re responsible for those people. Your reputation is key and there is a lot of accountability and responsibility.

Similarly, other career-related roles, such as being a career counselor, were perceived as valuable and meaningful. For example, Joshua considered his role as career counselor as important because it allowed him to help other consultants and provide them with support:

I’ve been doing counseling for two years now. So, when you reach manager, you’ve got to be counselors and you’re there to offer advice, to solve problems; if there’s an individual causing a lot of upset here then you need to help them get back on track. It’s a critical role, and it’s a nice role to have and for people you know to rely on me because you are in a big firm and people are always changing managers and colleagues, so it’s nice to have somebody that’s the same throughout.

The overidentifying narrative characterized consultants who described themselves as part of a community, to which they wanted to contribute actively. Relationships with others at work

were an important source of meaning in their career. They frequently expressed a sense of shared identity and felt emotionally connected to their colleagues, as Katie suggested:

I love the people that I work with. [...] I've never really had to work with difficult people and we're all quite aligned to the way that we work and the attitude towards that. [...] I think it could be quite different elsewhere.

Similarly, Oscar, who joined the organization as an experienced hire in the role of manager, opined, "I love it, actually; far more than I thought I would."

These participants generally perceived little or no tension in their careers. In the rare situations when they did, they reframed these tensions as opportunities for self-development, rather than attributing them to the organizational career system. For example, Joshua talked about the long periods away from home as a positive attribute of his role and a learning opportunity:

I think it's quite a learning curve, in any job; it's how you deal with it and how you manage it. You know, after a bit of practice, you do get very much used to being able to have a relationship or see your friends and manage your work. I suppose there are times when it's easier than others but I think I've certainly got used to it and I don't feel it a burden too much, anymore. Actually, sometimes being out of town is easier than working long hours when you're in London full-time, because at least then when you're out, you can just focus on the work and not worry too much about having to come home at a reasonable hour.

An excessive sense of identification became apparent when consultants actively defended Consult-King's career practices. While some analysts complained that the promotion system was unfair, Oscar attributed such issues to external factors, such as wrong timing or a person's lack of readiness for promotion, and avoided problematizing the issue:

I'm quite vocal about that because I get very annoyed when I hear the analysts say, "I got screwed over at promotion." You didn't get screwed over. Your time wasn't right or you weren't ready, or the system didn't work out for you this time. But you

didn't get screwed over because that would imply that it was unfair for you personally, and there is very little personal unfairness. There's en masse unfairness, which to me is probably not that unfair. If it's happening to everyone, right, then why is it unfair?

Consultants who use an overidentification narrative construct a sustainable career through articulating a strong sense of belonging to the organization, and identifying with their social context uncritically and often emotionally. Career tensions are rare and are reframed as an opportunity for self-development. This is informed by an idealized view of Consult-King as an organization that sacrifices its needs to provide space for consultants' self-realization, as suggested by Joshua, "I think the Consult-King company will do anything for you, but it allows you to do anything you want."

Conforming

Conforming narratives construe alignment in line with organizational career logic and practices (Gunz, 1988). Rather than exploring the personal meaning of one's journey through organizational roles, these narratives orientate themselves to the organization's promotion timelines. In Consult-King, career levels are clearly structured into analyst (A), consultant (C) and manager (M). Each has sub-categories, which describe the length of tenure. As Rose, who joined Consult-King as an experienced hire in the role of manager, explained, moving through these levels successfully and within a given timeframe was important:

We go through M1, M2 and M3 as a manager. At the moment, I'm M2. In September, I become M3. That's my last year before I could get promoted. I've got a "significant achieve" on my first year. It was like really good performance.

Similarly, Jake, an analyst, talked about wanting to get promoted to the next career level:

The next performance management period is in December, so there may be a chance of getting promoted within that, based on the usual performance times. It's around two years. So a realistic view would be next June, but there's still the chance this

December.

To achieve these career goals, consultants described how they enacted career practices that would help them to progress internally. For example, Rose suggested: “I do want to see if I can get to Senior Manager level. So, I’ll work my hardest to get there and see how it works.” For career advancement, it was important to get on high-profile projects with interesting work. To be selected for these projects, consultants had to obtain support from the senior managers in charge of allocating resources. Jake described how he proactively built a relationship with a senior manager to get on his desired projects:

In the current project, I was making sure that I worked initially directly with a strategy manager. Because this is an area I’m interested in, I made sure; I did whatever she asked to a good standard. By doing that, I built up a very good relationship with her and she knows she can come to me and give me the work and I’ll do a good job. Because I built up a good relationship with her both personally and professionally, she can push forward my agenda and my needs.

Similarly, Rose talked about actively seeking out powerful senior executives to support her promotion case during the regular ‘performance-laddering’ meeting:

In my last [performance rating], because I know this partner will be at that performance laddering, and another one that has a good relationship with me and I know that he supports me, I’m really pushing myself towards that account. Because at the end, it doesn’t matter really how much time and effort you put into work. It’s really who will be in there sitting, talking about you. [...] The point is to be in the right account with the right senior exec or partner.

In contrast to the overidentification narrative, these two accounts illustrate an instrumental approach to relationships, in which others are viewed as important gatekeepers and part of a network to be influenced politically.

Yet, our analysis also revealed some tensions in these consultants’ accounts. Jake and Rose both voiced some ambivalence about these relational practices. Jake described himself as

“effectively sucking up,” despite not normally being the “kind of person who would want to do that kind of thing.” Although Rose described her efforts in getting close to powerful partners, she also described herself as being “very bad with politics.” She criticized the system for making her feel “like a puppet” because of the control others had over her career development. Yet, these tensions did not fundamentally challenge their career meaning-making. Rather, these consultants’ narratives suggest that career progress requires such concerns to be ignored and, instead, enacting one’s career in alignment with organizational practices: “You absolutely have to inevitably do it in the way the company works” (Jake). These narratives sought to maintain personal agency by suggesting that Consult-King met the individuals’ current career development interests in terms of experience, learning and skills development. For example, Rose explained how the project-based nature of working suited her personal work and career preferences:

If I’m not doing anything different all the time I get really bored. And so, this is perfect because it’s project-based and I get to move on, and if I don’t like the people I can move on without quitting the firm. So I would actually say that this is the perfect sort of setup in that sense.

Thus, the conforming narrative aligns an individual’s career by describing how they are enacting and reproducing organizational career practices. Hierarchical career levels and organizational timelines are important reference points for career development. While some tensions are acknowledged, these are seen to be balanced by the promotion and learning opportunities offered by the organization.

Creating symbiosis

The ‘creating symbiosis’ narrative seeks to construe alignment in response to the experience of profound tension between work and personal values. For example, Martin, a senior manager,

articulated how, at one point in his career, he had been dissatisfied with the quality of his work and that he was not developing himself:

I did eighteen months of work where I was just, like, what I'm doing is crap. And I wasn't particularly proud of it [...] you're always trying to save something from it, rather than ever doing it properly. [...] When you looked at the output you were just, like, I've worked really hard for this and I knew that this is the best it could possibly be but if you said, "Oh, Martin, can you show me an example of some really good X, Y, Z?", I was never going to show it to you. It's always kind of just a bit of a botch job [...] I didn't feel I was developing myself. [...] I wasn't particularly proud of my outlook. I don't think it was having any tangible impact or benefit.

Similarly, although Raymond had been successfully promoted several times, he described a lack of meaning:

In terms of the general working environment, there was something... an itch that couldn't quite be scratched, or something just missing in terms of the self-actualization kind of feeling not quite in the work. I did well, you know; a good quality of life and working hard and learning a lot. But something I couldn't put my finger on.

Yet, rather than leaving the organization and taking up career opportunities elsewhere, these consultants spoke about having proactively created new career opportunities internally, which were both congruent with their personal values and beneficial for Consult-King. Their accounts described specific strategies by which they had made their personal career interests relevant to the organization. For example, Raymond spoke about his aim of becoming engaged in corporate social responsibility work. To realize this interest within Consult-King, he proactively built a business case that showed the value and relevance of a responsible business model to the firm. His actions resulted in a new role that he perceived as fulfilling, while still enabling him to continue his organizational career. He reflected:

It has not been one day over the last five to six years that I haven't felt that I'm doing exactly what I'm meant to be doing. There is just more alignment. I feel very at ease with myself with what I'm doing, what I'm meant to be doing. [...] I am making this company more successful. [...] I focus on the international development, the challenges of poverty and disease and climate change and sustainable development. [These] for me, are the biggest, most interesting things out there and I'm going to throw my energy into doing something hopefully positive on these things.

Martin described how his struggle with the quality of work had led him to identify a specific type of analysis that he wanted to specialize in. He seized the opportunity to put himself forward to senior management:

I was at a presentation and I saw that this type of analysis was reforming in a team. And I said, "Look, I really want to do it. I'll be your man to do it." And then, you know, they set up a dedicated internal team in the UK that I created. It was great because I was learning all this sort of stuff. So, I was getting a lot of satisfaction out of what I was doing because I was feeling that what I was doing was really developing myself.

Martin's story construes alignment as resulting from proactively balancing his personal career interests and the need to make a contribution to the organization.

These creating symbiosis narratives referred to relational practices through which the narrators were generating support from senior sponsors and strong internal networks. This is illustrated by Daniel's account: as a managing director, he struggled at some point in his career, suggesting that he "wasn't really learning anything fundamentally new." He described how obtaining senior sponsorship and establishing relationships with senior people in the organization helped him to create a new client market, which was in line with both his personal interests and those of the organization:

What helped me make the transition? [...] Protection. The fact that I'd been in the firm for so long, I'd developed a track record of capability with a group and I could pick the right people – they're now very, very senior people – and this one guy,

Mark, is so senior that he can basically create a small team and not have anyone interfere. So that's pretty much what made the difference, I believe. He's given me the freedom to innovate however I want to; I can court whoever I want to; I have the financial freedom in budgetary terms certainly to be able to travel and to do the things that I want to do.

The three accounts of Martin, Raymond, and Daniel suggest that embedding their personal career interests within the organization required them to step away from the organization's promotion time frames. For example, Martin suggested that following his "internal compass" required "making a trade-off between the easy route," implying that he missed a promotion round. Similarly, Daniel stated:

I had chosen to sub-optimize career progression in order to develop deep expertise, and some of that was mindful of the fact that I'm going to always be in Consult-King, probably. Therefore, I wanted to go to an area where I thought there was big growth and opportunity.

As these accounts show, creating symbiosis involved a personal meaning-driven career approach. Consultants solved the tensions that they experienced at the intersection of their personal career interests and organizational careers by creating new roles, which did not exist previously. They did so by mobilizing existing ways of working, particularly relational practices, in such ways that the associated opportunities became valuable to the organization. This required distancing themselves from short-term promotional timelines in order to have a sustainable career in the long term.

Moving on

'Moving on' narratives articulate a sense that one can no longer align personal career priorities with organizational interests. Consultants employing these narratives fail to resolve career tensions within Consult-King, and conclude that their time in the organization has come to an end and they must pursue a career elsewhere.

For example, Martha had started to struggle with the strong norms around competition, a perceived lack of community, and strictly defined internal career timelines. To address these issues, she decided to take a leave of absence to become involved in projects with non-profit organizations that gave her a sense of community. However, when she approached internal decision-makers to get the necessary organizational support, she faced difficulty:

From the beginning I wanted to go on a leave of absence. However, it was postponed because I still worked on a project and they didn't want to let me go at that time. First, the people agreed, but the community did not agree, because they were not asked accurately; HR should have done that.

While Martha realized the importance of social support, "You always need to involve the right people, the ones that you collaborate [with] on a project, and they need to support you," she struggled to make her personal career interests relevant to internal sponsors. Instead of enabling her career development, the people around her became a barrier. Following her return, she started to plan her career outside Consult-King, contacting non-profit organizations that she felt were aligned with her values, and applying for vacant positions.

Similarly, Miriam's narrative describes how her confrontational encounter with a colleague, who competed with her for promotion, led to her losing the support of her sponsor and social network:

Two days after that conversation I got an email saying that I'm rolled off from the project and then nobody would talk to me until the last ... very, very last, day. And then, officially, I was told by that lady that it was change in demands: "Your service is no longer required".

In relation to this incident, Miriam described taking a period of health-related absence. When she returned to work, she continued to struggle with the breakdown in her work relationships. She referred to a senior manager who hindered her career progression and whom she described

as a “dictator,” causing her to feel like she was “nothing” in the organization. Concluding that “the relationship was broken,” she described her search for external opportunities:

I understand that there’s no future for me here and I don’t want a future with this organization. So, I put up my CV properly on search engines on Friday. And then on Monday I started getting calls and emails. I had interviews on Tuesday and Wednesday. On Wednesday I was employed. [My] official label is now business analyst; I’m a business analyst working for a niche consultancy.

The account of Anna, a senior manager, also describes her sense that it was time to move on to accomplish a sustainable career. Planning a family, she could not see herself balancing non-work commitments with the high work demands of a consulting career. Although she recognized that women received career support from the organization, she remained concerned about the feasibility of being a mother and a consultant at the same time. She referred to a lack of successful role models in Consult-King: “There are only very few women who make it, balancing their career and private life.” She identified other factors that influenced her decision, such as being “curious to try something new,” and no longer feeling motivated by hierarchical career progression: “You can see the different career stages and how people develop at each stage; that’s not worthwhile for me any longer.” Unable to see how she could make a meaningful career in consulting long-term, she described her decision to make use of her consulting skills and external networks to apply for positions with one of Consult-King’s clients.

The ‘moving on’ narrative illustrates that in situations where individuals cannot overcome career-related tensions within their organizations, pursuing a sustainable career involves exploring new career opportunities outside their current employment. The moving on narrative enables consultants to resolve tensions and create new career meaning, enabling them eventually to move into different roles: Anna decided to join a client firm, Miriam started a role in a niche consultancy, and Martha applied for positions in non-profit organizations.

Discussion

This paper adopts a narrative approach to examine how individuals construe alignment between their careers and organizational interests. Drawing on 34 interviews with management consultants in one large international consulting firm, our analysis suggests four alignment narratives: overidentifying, conforming, creating symbiosis and moving on (see Table 2). Our study makes three contributions.

First, we extend the sustainable career framework in theoretical terms by conceptualizing individual career alignment as a narrative accomplishment. Although alignment has been identified as an important aspect of sustainable careers (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015; De Vos et al., 2016), the ways by which individuals align their career interests with those of their employers have not been well understood. By applying a narrative approach, we focus on how people construct their career experiences and make meaning of the alignment between themselves and their employer. While the four dimensions of the career sustainability framework – time, social space, agency, and meaning – were prevalent across all four alignment narratives, each narrative construes these dimensions differently. In other words, while alignment was important for all individuals, we discovered that their ways of accomplishing alignment in their career in relation to organizational interests differed substantially.

Importantly, our narrative approach suggests that tensions are an inherent characteristic of accomplishing sustainable careers. This observation is consistent with previous research, which shows that tensions are an important aspect of career development (Savickas, 2012; Cohen & Duberley, 2015; Simosi, Rousseau, & Daskalaki, 2015; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017). Our findings reveal that people construe tensions in varied ways. While some appear to not

perceive any tensions or only superficial ones, others perceive tensions more deeply. The different ways by which the four narratives seek to overcome these tensions is central to our understanding of how sustainable careers are construed. While some narratives suggest that individuals resolve contradictory demands by leaving the organization ('moving on'), others use tensions as a resource for construing a long-term sustainable career within the organization ('creating symbiosis'). Based on our findings, we propose that attention to the role of tensions in alignment narratives provides a more holistic understanding of sustainable careers that is embedded in the lived reality of career-making. Specifically, we argue that resolving the tensions of ambiguous and divergent career experiences is central to achieving a sustainable career in the long term. As our findings suggest, this may involve revising assumptions about one's career in order to construct new career meanings for the future.

As a second theoretical contribution, we develop an understanding of career sustainability as being contextually embedded. From this perspective, "context is not a pre-existing fixed container" (McLaren & Durepos, 2019, p. 1) in which sustainable careers happen. Rather, sustainable careers are inherently entwined with how people construe the context in which they are situated. From this perspective, individuals' career agency is not independent of social space or organizational interests and practices, but is prioritized in different ways. For instance, 'overidentifying' narratives construe career sustainability through career practices that aim to advance organizational interests. This is informed by an understanding of social space as a community and larger network to which consultants belong. In 'conforming' narratives, consultants engage in career practices that focus on internal career advancement. These consultants view social space as political, defined by power relations, and instrumentally influenced. In contrast, 'creating symbiosis' narratives prioritize personal agency in creating new career opportunities while also aligning the individual with the requirement to generate business value for the organization. Underlying this narrative is an

understanding of context as enabling, but also one capable of being shaped in a more flexible way. In contrast to this, ‘moving on’ narratives describe externally focused career practices and construe career agency as primarily oriented toward personal values and ideals, such as taking a leave of absence to do some not-for-profit work. This is associated with a view of context as deterministic, with social relationships presenting an insurmountable barrier. Thus, our findings indicate that a comprehensive understanding of sustainable careers requires greater attention to the contextually embedded *meaning* of accomplishing a sustainable career.

Third, our findings contribute empirically to the understanding of career sustainability in particularly challenging organizations. Professional organizations such as consulting, law, and accountancy are generally assumed to not offer long-term career possibilities because of their emphasis on hierarchical career progression and an up-or-out career logic (e.g., Gustafsson, Swart, & Kinnie, 2018; Malhotra, Morris, & Smets, 2010). Our findings extend research that has focused on how consultants either conform to (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004) or resist (Costas & Grey, 2014) institutional career models. Specifically, our analysis shows that distancing and deviating from dominant rules and practices may be temporary, while consultants seek to construct a longer-term sustainable career in line with existing career models. Our study also contributes to research that emphasizes consultants’ struggle to achieve work–life balance (Noury et al., 2017). On the one hand, our findings provide evidence of the continued difficulty of doing so, which was particularly the case when consultants could not see a way of resolving the tensions that existed at the intersection of their professional and private spheres, and consequently decided to leave the organization. On the other hand, we also show that achieving a long-term balance is possible but may require consultants to mobilize informal and formal work practices in a way that creates new roles.

Limitations and further directions for research

Collecting data in one consulting organization and one particular professional context raises questions about the generalizability of our findings. While our findings suggest generic constructs that provide a foundation for studying alignment in sustainable careers across a wider range of settings, further research needs to examine the extent to which the four alignment narratives can be transferred to other highly normative professionalized settings. To this end, studies may investigate how people accomplish a sustainable career in other professions, such as investment banking, law, and higher education. Scholars could also examine how individuals construe careers in project-based, but less hierarchical work environments, such as the creative industries (Eikhof & Chudzikowski, 2019; Grabher, 2002). In addition, our focus on management consultants' career narratives foregrounds individuals' perspectives on their role as employees. Future research needs to extend this perspective by examining the perspectives of the human resource managers and senior managers who, as representatives of the organization, implement career management systems to capture their views on what makes a sustainable career.

Practical implications

Our four alignment narratives have important practical implications for the study and pursuit of sustainable careers. By informing an understanding of how individuals' career narratives construe career sustainability over time, our findings are relevant to career counselors and career coaches, as well as to human resource development professionals who seek to support people's career development within and across organizations.

First, our findings suggest that individuals can develop ownership of sustainable careers by creating different opportunities and pathways. By reflecting on alignment narratives, individuals create awareness of their preferences and values. Through insights on how they construe their career narratives, individuals can develop an understanding of alignment within

their employing organization. Individuals may sometimes construe a too-narrow perspective. For example, the ‘moving on’ career narrative might signal a limited understanding of available career practices in ways that compromise future career endeavors within the organization.

Second, construal of different alignment narratives can enable career ownership across different career phases. For example, in early career phases it might be necessary to construe narratives that are ‘conforming’; for example, complying with organization-set timelines for promotion. In subsequent career phases, it may be more productive to construe ‘creating symbiosis’ narratives within the relevant organization to provide alignment over time. To advance to partner level in management consulting, it is helpful to construe one’s career in entrepreneurial terms. Similarly, outside management consulting, organizations have objectives and expectations such as successful financial performance and satisfying the demands of clients. This generates the need to convey a proactive career approach, as represented in the ‘creating symbiosis’ narrative.

Third, an understanding of career alignment narratives provides insights for organizational actors who work with career practices in organizations, such as human resource development professionals, senior managers, and career coaches. The four career narratives identified in this study suggest that organizational career practices can both facilitate and constrain people’s development of sustainable careers. Our findings suggest that accomplishing a sustainable career requires that organizations be open to employees’ ideas and help them to create career opportunities. Specifically, organizations can play a supportive role by engaging in career conversations with employees. This involves conversations that enhance mutual (self-)awareness and improve the understanding of future career needs. Organizations should recognize that people’s career needs change over time and, thus, could develop more flexible career practices. For example, in the context of management consulting, the ‘up-or-out’ career logic of professional organizations has the purpose of motivating employees

through career advancement, as well as directing a part of the workforce toward organizational exit. Yet, more recently, there is evidence that some consulting firms are adopting practices that accommodate changing workforce demographics (Noury et al., 2017). In this respect, a more profound rethinking of organizational career models and a critical engagement with how people construe career meanings can enable more systemic ways of managing sustainable careers. Moreover, this can also inform career counselors and career coaches within higher education; for example, those working with MBA students and business executives who are seeking to transform their careers. Being able to differentiate between different alignment narratives could enable these students and clients to adopt a more empowering repertoire of career narratives. In order to construe a long-term sustainable career, career coaches can support individuals in reframing their alignment narratives. Our study suggests that this is not only a rhetorical task, but can also involve developing new skills that have organizational value (Adams & Zanzi, 2004), creating new markets for established services, building the business case for one's ideas, and mobilizing internal sponsors and senior managers for the necessary career support.

Conclusion

In this empirical paper, we have argued for a narrative approach to examine how individuals construe alignment between their careers and organizational interests. Drawing on a qualitative study of 34 management consultants, we identified four alignment narratives: *overidentifying*, *conforming*, *creating symbiosis*, and *moving on*. Our findings contribute to the existing understanding of sustainable careers by conceptualizing career alignment as a narrative accomplishment and by identifying tensions as an inherent characteristic of this accomplishment. We also strengthened a situated understanding of sustainable careers, illustrating how the construction of career sustainability is contextually embedded. In addition,

we contribute to the existing literature by providing evidence of how individuals in particularly challenging organizations such as consultancies can achieve career sustainability. We also described practical implications of relevance to individual career actors, career counselors, and career coaches, as well as to HR professionals, and presented suggestions for future research. As the question of how to accomplish a sustainable career in an increasingly demanding and challenging environment fuels more academic and practical debate, we suggest that our findings are important to both scholars researching sustainable careers and practitioners providing career support, as well as to individuals seeking to make sustainable career journeys.

Note

¹ Consult-King is a fictional name that we used throughout the article.

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Table 1. Participant overview

		Career level	Tenure	Gender	Country of employment
1	Daniel	Managing Director	14 years 2 months	Male	UK
2	Matthias	Managing Director	11 years	Male	Austria/Germany
3	Anna	Senior Manager	11 years	Female	Austria/Germany
4	Maria	Senior Manager	10 years	Female	UK
5	Martin	Senior Manager	8 years 10 months	Male	UK
6	Raymond	Senior Manager	6 years 2 months	Male	UK
7	Richard	Senior Manager	10 years 6 months	Male	UK
8	Sebastian	Senior Manager	4 years	Male	UK
9	Beatrice	Manager	6 years 8 months	Female	UK
10	James	Manager	9 years 3 months	Male	UK
11	Joshua	Manager	4 years 3 months	Male	UK
12	Katie	Manager	4 years 6 months	Female	UK
13	Martha	Manager	6 years 6 months	Female	Austria/Germany
14	Rolf	Manager	8 years 4 months	Male	Austria/Germany
15	Rose	Manager	2 years	Female	UK
16	Susan	Manager	10 years 6 months	Female	Austria/Germany
17	Oscar	Manager	1 year	Male	UK
18	Benjamin	Consultant	10 months	Male	Austria/Germany
19	Emily	Consultant	2 years 6 months	Female	UK
20	Ethan	Consultant	2 years 8 months	Male	UK
21	Jack	Consultant	4 years 9 months	Male	UK
22	Julia	Consultant	2 years 3 months	Female	UK
23	Karl	Consultant	4 years 4 months	Male	Austria/Germany
24	Noah	Consultant	3 years 6 months	Male	UK
25	Robert	Consultant	1 year 9 months	Male	UK
26	Zoe	Consultant	2 years 3 months	Female	UK
27	Johanna	Consultant	1 year 9 months	Female	Austria/Germany
28	Claire	Analyst	1 year 4 months	Female	UK
29	Jake	Analyst	1 year 3 months	Male	UK
30	Imogen	Analyst	2 years 2 months	Female	UK
31	Miriam	Analyst	3 years 8 months	Female	UK
32	Philipp	Analyst	2 years 6 months	Male	UK
33	Thomas	Analyst	10 months	Male	Austria/Germany
34	Harry	Analyst	1 year 4 months	Male	UK

Table 2. Overview of alignment narratives

Narratives of alignment	Sustainable career dimensions				<i>Tensions</i>
	<i>Time</i>	<i>Social space</i>	<i>Agency</i>	<i>Meaning</i>	
<i>Over-identifying</i>	Temporal continuity	Strong sense of belonging and connection, Co-workers/ superiors as community	Career practices to advance organizational interests	Organizationally focused career meaning making, including hierarchical and non-hierarchical career roles	Tensions not or rarely experienced
<i>Conforming</i>	Orientation on promotion timelines	Instrumental approach, Co-workers/ superiors as gatekeepers and political networks	Career practices focus on internal career advancement	Meaning making includes both subjective and objective career dimensions	Some tensions at intersection of individual and organizational career practices
<i>Creating symbiosis</i>	Momentary distancing from organizational promotion timeframes to achieve long-term sustainability	Mobilising of internal communities and external networks, Co-workers/ superiors as enablers	Career practices focus on creating mutual benefit for individual and organization	Meaning making focuses on subjective career dimensions	Strong, value-based tensions experienced
<i>Moving on</i>	Temporal break with organization, career exit from organization	Distancing due to relationship breakdown, Co-workers/ superiors as barriers	Career practices focus on external employability	Meaning making in relation to external context	Strong tensions that cannot be overcome